Reincarnation

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The Memory of Previous Lives

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THE MEMORY OF PREVIOUS LIVES

It is nearly twenty-five years since I met the idea of reincarnation. It seemed at once to open the way for me to a logical explanation of life ; and because of this and some other teachings to which Theosophy introduced me, I joined the Theosophical Society. I do not intend to afflict my readers with a biography ; I want only to say that at that time people who talked about reincarnation got themselves laughed at. What a change has now taken place in public opinion ! Last year *The Spectator* invited articles on the subject. Books and plays and films are taking it for their theme in ever-increasing numbers. It is constantly discussed in the newspapers as an attractive and rational hypothesis. The number of intelligent people with whom one meets in ordinary daily life and who hold it is astonishing. And more and more are people realising that the doctrine of reincarnation, coupled with that of the pre-existence of the soul, has had in history a very respectable and goodly company of adherents.

It is not my purpose in this pamphlet to deal with this side of the question, nor indeed with the claim that reincarnation can make for recognition and acceptance on its philosophic merits. All this is dealt with in some excellent books

already existing,* and in the pamphlets of the series of which this forms part. I have to deal with certain technical aspects of the subject and more especially with the question as to whether it is possible for us to remember our previous lives.

One of the first phrases that usually turns up in any discussion of the subject is this: "Why, then, if reincarnation be true, do we not remember our past lives?" To this one usually replies with the statement that we do. And in the very essential meaning of the word "remember" this is quite true. The question turns on what we mean by memory, and on what section of man's nature we regard as the source and seat of memory.

WHAT IS MAN?

THESE questions lead us on at once to consider the constitution or being of man. Again in this pamphlet I take for granted that view of man which regards him as a spiritual being—there is no room here to take up the argument against materialism, which is ably treated elsewhere in Theosophical literature. Man on our hypothesis is a Spiritual Intelligence, a spark from the Divine Flame, who uses a soul or intermediate nature, and a body in order to bring himself into touch with the world into which he enters. That Spirit may be regarded as having within itself all the qualities and attributes of God in a germinal state or condition of latency. As the acorn contains within itself potentially the giant oak tree and, being

* Irving S. Cooper, *Reincarnation, the Hope of the World;* E. D. Walker, *Reincarnation, A Study of Forgotten Truth;* Eva Martin, *The Ring of Return;* Annie Besant, *The Necessity for Reincarnation* and *Theosophy* (Jacks' Series); C. W. Leadbeater, *Reincarnation.*

sown in the soil of the field, passes through many intervening stages of growth, so the Spirit is sown in a world of manifestation. It gains its earliest experiences through the intermediary of a physical body, which places him in relationship with the physical world. This body is the Spirit's vehicle of consciousness ; he expresses himself through the body into the world around him, and similarly through the body he contacts the experiences with which the external world is intended to provide him. By means of these experiences the powers within him are awakened into activity—that which was latent becomes explicit. Life is full of such experiences. We have special ties of affection with friends, and the sight of a friend calls out the feeling of love from within us. Adversities or difficulties confront us day by day, and awaken within us the spirit of courage, determination, strength and understanding. We can see that all through the day's life man meets with a succession of experiences, each of which leaves its lasting impression upon him. That which takes place by the mediation of the physical body at the physical level of consciousness takes place at other levels of his nature through other bodies or vehicles of consciousness, called in Theosophical books superphysical.

THE NATURE OF MEMORY

We can now revert to our question about remembering past lives. " What is it that remembers ? " It is certainly not the physical brain, for that has been newly fashioned for this life, and cannot in consequence be expected to remember (in

the ordinary sense of the word) lives in which it has had no share. The present brain, therefore, does not remember events of the man's past life. Indeed, the brain forgets things which happened yesterday or a week or a year ago ; and nobody thinks of using this absence of memory as a proof that the events of yesterday or a year ago did not take place. But there *is* a part of the man which remembers. Some people call this the Spirit or Soul to avoid complication ; but in the Theosophical conception of man's constitution the Spirit is still higher and the subject of later development, and this part, therefore, is often called the Ego (a Latin word meaning "I."). It is this part which maintains its identity throughout the man's many incarnations. It may be regarded as the permanent nucleus of the man which puts itself down as the representative of the Spirit into one incarnation after another. It absorbs the experiences of any one particular incarnation as they undergo the process of being transformed—or distilled, as it were, into the quintessence of faculty. It is this "faculty" which is the real memory. A man has certain qualities of character which are natural to him. He can work upon these and change and strengthen them, of course, by his effort ; but still they are qualities which have not had specially to be worked for in this life. There are certain characteristics of a child, innate tendencies, which rapidly show themselves and develop into fully fledged character—these people speak of as the natural endowments of birth. And this is what we here maintain to be the true "memory" of past incarnations. We can continue to use the word "memory" or not, as we please. Memory usually means a series of recollections of events, or impressions recorded and stored in or through the brain. We can give the word a deeper

sense, or we can simply say that the fruit of the past is the wisdom which is synthesised from past experiences and stored in the Ego of the man as his permanent inheritance.

This process of synthesising isolated and separated experiences into faculty or character is not confined to the period between one life and another—it takes place here and now, within the precincts of our present life, and can therefore be studied and recognised. Take the case of a child learning to write or to read. He is taught caligraphy, that is, the art of writing the letters of the alphabet. He learns the precise shape and curve of the letter " a," or he learns to spell out words, syllable by syllable, in reading. But what of the process when he has grown to maturity ? Do I still pay objective attention to the making of my " a's " when I write a letter to someone ? Or must I still, when reading, make the effort to spell out syllables ? No, the details of action have been handed over to the mechanism of my subconsciousness, and I now have the faculty of writing and reading. When a pianist first studies his instrument, he must devote much attention to fingering, to scale exercises, to the spelling out of the notes and chords of the music, and to the expression of these in terms of fingering and sound. The expert pianist no longer needs to concern himself with these rudiments of his craft. His task is now to interpret directly his music ; the musical notation, and often hands, are far from his attention. We have the faculty of writing or reading, or of playing. So the Ego, as the result of his training in any given life, has his faculty or character as the product of that life.

It will thus be seen that there is a very reasonable answer to the objection that " we do not remember our past lives." In the deepest and truest sense, we do.

ORDER AND JUSTICE

Let me divert from the immediate subject for a moment to say what a satisfying feeling of order and justice this conception brings into our lives. A friend of mine, now dead, knew the great English actress, Ellen Terry, very well. He once asked her if she believed in reincarnation. Her answer was swift and direct. " Of course ; how could I be what I am, otherwise ? " The horrible inequalities which exist between man and man fall into their places in the scheme. Why should one man be born an Australian aborigine and another into circumstances of the highest culture ? Can there otherwise be any justice in the fact that the one should be born into surroundings so cramped and hopeless, unless it be that he is a beginner needing the earliest and crudest stimulations to awaken the dormant consciousness within him, and that the other has need, for the supreme development of his faculties, of those experiences with which an environment of culture and refinement alone can provide him ?

CASES OF MEMORY ON RECORD

I do not propose to occupy space in examining cases which are cited of people who have had flashes of memory of past lives. I have met such cases in European

countries—and I refer to people who have made no study of occultism. Cases are to be met with in India, and are of common occurrence in Burma and only to a lesser extent in the Dutch Indies. Mr. Fielding Hall, if I remember rightly, speaks of the frequency of such cases in Burma. Residents in Eastern countries do come across instances of this kind of thing from time to time, but it is seldom that much attention is paid to them. I have one friend, a lady who has travelled and worked much in India and in countries of the newer civilization (for there are signs of a new race of sensitive children in these countries), who has made records of several such cases that have come under her notice, and very interesting they are. Once when in Ceylon, I heard objective details of a child who had claimed to be an officer killed in a certain war in Burma. Enquiries were made, and it was found that an officer of the name given had been killed. Moreover, the child had a peculiar birth-mark (so-called) on its body where the officer had received his death wound. It was a case of quick reincarnation.

Another interesting line of study is associated with the use of psycho-analysis and hypnotism. There are psycho-analysts who believe that they have succeeded in carrying back the memory of their patients to ante-natal conditions and even to past lives. The late Colonel de Rochas obtained similar results in the case of hypnotised persons with whom he experimented, though it did not prove possible to obtain any historical verification of the characters whom his sensitives claimed to have been.

It is not yet possible to adduce phenomena of this category as offering anything in the nature of demonstrated proof; they can only be held to justify a presumptive hypothesis and to support and strengthen a conviction already held.

IS MEMORY OF PREVICUS LIVES THEN POSSIBLE?

THE question at once arises, if it be held that these cases may be genuine: "Is it then possible for the ordinary man to recover the memory of his past lives?" To this the answer can be given: "Generally speaking, no!" To recover his memory it is almost essential to cease to be an "ordinary man" and to become an extraordinary one. Let me explain what I mean.

The ordinary man does not remember his past lives—in the common meaning of the word "remember"—because the knowledge would render life too difficult for him. Life in any modern city is difficult enough. The increasing pressure and stress of modern civilisation is already leaving a train of neurotic wrecks in its wake. Fancy what would be the plight of an ordinary man to whom the past became as an open book! What a pressure of events would crowd upon his mind, and how complicated would be his relationships with those who had had dealings with him in the past. To note his past misdeeds and to see their Karma moving in upon him with inexorable precision! No; the veil of oblivion is a merciful dispensation, shielding us from the overpowering actuality of a Truth that we could not face.

But when I speak of a man becoming " extra-ordinary," I mean that there is a stage when man begins to emerge from the ordinary somnolent attitude towards life, and to wake up to the realities that encompass him. The consciousnes of most people is still largely in a state of dream ; they are little awake to the external world and its possibilities. Gradually man awakens to a more active and fruitful intercourse with the world around him, and through this richness of experience his Ego becomes ripe with wisdom. There comes a further stage when he begins to emerge from the prison house of the body, and new vistas greet his awakening consciousness. For the limitation of his consciousness to the physical world is but a temporary phase in his career. As he learns to be self-disinterested, to be more spontaneously interested in his fellow-men and in great world-problems, as he trains himself to work for others and for humanity as a whole rather than to minister to his own personal pleasure and self-gratification, the centre of his consciousness rises stage by stage, and the link between the lower man and the Ego grows ever stronger and stronger. Freedom from petty and personal interests lifts him gradually out of the separated personal consciousness into a world of larger consciousness, and this stage has been called by mystics " the spiritual marriage of the soul." The consciousness of the Ego and that of the personality that he has been using as his instrument gradually becomes blended, and the man in the fulness of his own experience knows himself as the Inner Ruler Immortal, as transcending the physical body.

There is a common fallacy into which many people unconsciously slip that the life of the soul begins only when the bodily life is ended. But the two are

contemporaneous. The life of the Soul, or Ego, is closely bound up with the experiences of the body. And just as man can see out through his physical body into the world around him, so gradually does he learn to open up the windows of the soul, and instead of leading a life of inward-turned subjective consciousness (as he did also at the earlier stages in the physical body), he learns to turn his attention outwards through the higher vehicles, just as he has learned to do on the physical plane. Here he meets, for example, with the so-called " dead," those who have dropped off for the time being the physical body, and are living in the intermediate world.

There are practices by which this enlarging of the scope of consciousness can be quickened. The East has called this *Yoga*—or union ; the West, Meditation. By learning to control the physical body, to regulate the emotions and the mind, so that they become obedient and not unruly servants, and by practice at the strengthening and refining of the emotions and mind, a man learns gradually to awaken himself to self-consciousness at these higher levels of his being.

How does all this bear on reincarnation and the memory of past lives ? In this way. By such exercises, whether practised deliberately, or equivalently worked out as a consequence of the experience of life, a man brings into the sphere of his waking consciousness experiences and knowledge hitherto appertaining to the realm of his superconsciousness. Eventually he learns to raise himself into union with the Ego—that permanent part of him which has been the watcher and active agent in all his incarnations of the past and who therefore can know and

participate in them all. To reach union with the Higher Self, to know by personal experience of the One Divine Life which dwells in everything, " the Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world," is the aim of all religion. Religion (Lat. *religare* means " to bind back ") is that factor in our lives which binds us back to the spiritual principle within us. The discovery of this is the finding of the Lost Word, or of the Great Secret—the True Word of a Master Mason. The ceremonies of religion are intended to help and train us towards this. They uplift the mind and feelings at frequent and regular intervals, according to a specially designed plan, and give us experiences of consciousness which are above our ordinary level. These are repeated frequently, and it soon becomes possible for us to repeat them by our own self-initiated effort—until these experiences become more or less permanent modes of our consciousness.

As soon as a man is able to raise his consciousness above the level of the physical, above the astral or emotional body, above the body of the lower analytical mind, and to look outwards at the level of the causal body—as it is called by Theosophists, that of the Ego—reincarnation becomes for him a matter of personal knowledge and experience. Having attained one-ness with the Ego, he can identify himself with those descents into the lower worlds which the Ego has made at periodic intervals, that is at each act of incarnation. Thus he can study the conditions under which he lived and gained experience in that life, which helped to make him what he is now. He can trace back into the past the causes of good or evil " karma " that he made, his relationships with other people, the acquisition

of qualities that he now possesses. The history of many civilizations may open before him. He took part, perhaps, in the life of ancient Babylon or Egypt, of Greece or Rome ; he fought, perhaps, in the battles of the Crusades ; many and varied have been his experiences and the ties which he has made. All combine to make him the many-sided and complex being that he is to-day. And through yet other experiences will he pass, till he attains Salvation, Accomplishment, Perfection, Nirvana, Liberation—call it what we will—and his cycle of *human* evolution is over.

A Buddhist monk once explained to me the practice laid down in the tradition of his religion for recovering the memory of past lives. The first exercise was to reproduce in imagination the events of the day, but in reverse order, moving backwards in time. After much practice the events of the night, when out of the body during sleep, would begin to flow into the mind. Then the events of childhood, the ante-natal life, the post-mortem life, and so back to the previous incarnation. Interesting—if somewhat tedious ! It would in practice be far easier to get back directly to the root causes in previous lives of tendencies now strong within our character.

SOME PSYCHIC EXPERIENCES

WHAT I have just been saying may mean a good deal to some people, and may exhaust the patience of others as a farrago of cloudy verbiage. These experiences

of consciousness which mark the way of the occultist or mystic belong, of course, to a higher order of human consciousness. We often read of the Mysteries of the older religions, and Christianity also had its early Mysteries. St. Paul speaks of a man of his acquaintance (despite the later context, it is often thought that he referred to himself) who was " caught up to the third heaven," " whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell," " heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful to utter," and he says, " Of such an one will I glory."* The reference is interesting to students of these things, for it is intended to convey that the psychic did not fall into unconscious trance, as we should say in these days, but was able to bring through the experience into his waking consciousness. The word " Mystery " comes from the Greek *muein*, meaning to close the mouth or eyes—and it refers to a category of teaching or conscious experience, not only which it is not lawful to utter to the unprepared (" the swine " in Gospel language), but also which is ineffable or incapable of being uttered in many cases because so far transcending anything which can be defined or expressed within the limitations of a physical brain. In ecclesiastical teaching the Mysteries of religion transcend the intellect ; but this is in reality not in the sense that they are beyond human understanding, but rather beyond normal human understanding and to be apprehended by the next category of human consciousness—intuition or direct spiritual perception.

The consciousness of the Ego, or that order of consciousness which we called

* II Corinthians xii 2-5.

buddhic or cosmic is perfectly real—more real and more intensely vital than any lower order. It is unity of consciousness with all other living beings. But it can only be realized by those who have developed their faculties to the appropriate degree—for others it is as yet a latent faculty.

I want now to descend for a few moments from the heights of which I have been speaking, and to deal with a few simple points less remote from the course of ordinary human experience. It does sometimes happen to people that they catch glimpses of past incarnations—either their own or somebody else's. These broken glimpses can be seen at a lower level of consciousness. Pictures are thus reflected at the astral level, and persons who are " psychic " may see them. Indeed, I have known of mediums who made a practice of reading people's past lives for them. It need not be supposed that these glimpses are necessarily incorrect, yet on the other hand, they cannot be taken as reliable. Only one who has been properly trained and who can " function " at the causal level has the means of seeing accurately and fully. Let people then beware of that subtle flattery on the part of casual psychics which implies that one has been somebody of great importance in the past. Most ordinary people have had even more ordinary lives in the past, the cumulative effect of which has been to bring them to the present stage where they have possibilities of becoming rather less ordinary. The knowledge of Theosophy is a master-key which makes rapid progress possible, because henceforward the man can work intelligently and self-consciously, with an understanding of the plan.

There is another method of glimpsing past lives, experience of which is by no means uncommon amongst people of sensitive disposition. There is a good deal of truth in the old saying that " the eyes are the windows of the soul." The magnetism that flows through the eyes is often powerful and they are a link with the Higher Self of the person. It sometimes happens that a person seems to be transfigured. The eyes seem to remain the same, but the dress and features and environment may change into the scene of some past civilisation. The interesting part of this experience, I repeat, is that the eyes seem to remain the same. What is continuous is not so much the shape or colour of the eyes as the magnetism flowing through them, which is the expression of the Ego himself. Such experiences, totally unexpected as they usually are, in most cases are quite genuine, and they represent glimpses of former incarnations. Some people seem easily thus to change, and this seems to be the result of previous lives of strong experience, which have stamped their impress forcibly upon the ego. People who are in a state of intense mental or spiritual activity seem also to change in this way—great speakers or musicians, officiants at ceremonies and so forth. In such cases the Ego is more fully expressed when the person is hard at work along his own special line, and so the transformation is facilitated.

The special predisposition on the part of the psychic which makes these experiences possible is the ability to come easily into psychic *rapport* with other people. There are natures who are particularly sensitive to the influence of their fellows. Each person has his own " personal magnetism " or influence with which

he is constantly surrounded. This " atmosphere " of a person is one of the characteristics by which in some measure we identify him. If we think of a friend, we normally form some rough and incomplete image of his face or person, but normally also we think of the special " atmosphere " or influence of the person, which marks his character or identity. Most people do this subconsciously, but if a person chooses to work deliberately and purposefully at this process of character-identification he is beginning what we usually call " psychic investigation." His endeavour may result in the seeing of the colours of the aura, in a vague " sensing " of character—or he may by this attempt at blending consciousness contact other lives of the person being examined, in the way that I have described above. We have to be careful in such work not to trespass upon the privacy of other people. The same sense of honour which deters us from reading letters left open on the table, enters also into this question. Students must use their discretion in the matter.

These experiments, as I say, are all of interest ; but the one royal road—along which human beings travel as a rule but slowly—is that of the gradual control and development of the body, the emotions and the mind, the enlargement and decentralising of one's interests, and the throwing of oneself into work for humanity, which gives the Ego scope to express himself more and more fully through the personality. Gradually in this way, do we lift ourselves up into a larger and wider consciousness, until we attain the sense of unity with all that lives.

J. I. WEDGWOOD.

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